[Five Years More]

Roaldus Richmond Recorded in Writers' Section Files

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“We make granite-working machinery and tools mostly,” Harmon said. “We turn out other machines too, but being located in Barre it's natural that most of our stuff in for the granite sheds. The shop is on the riverbank near the stonesheds across from North Main Street. It's that long red building you see coming into town from the north. Part of it dates back to 1840, the date is on the wall, and that was the original foundry built by Joshua Twing. Almost across the way from the machine-shop is the Twing House, that old red brick house built about the same time. It sets back beside the Venetian Garden, with a gasoline station on the other side of it. This section of town was called Twingville in the old days. The settlement grew up around Twing's foundry and his home. The house was quite a mansion for those times; it's still a good looking house. It's one of Barre's three Georgian Colonial brick houses; the others are the Wheelock House at the center of town, and the Paddock House on South Main. They're the oldest houses and the best examples of architecture. They look kind of lost and out-of-place today with beer joints and department stores and service stations all around them.

“This part was called Twingville. Then there was Gospel Village, built up around a church at the middle of town. And Jockey Hollow was what they called the flats at the south end 2 where they used to race their horses. Those were the three sections of the old original settlement. Barre was just a little country village then, scattered along the valley, and granite had never been heard of around here.

“One of Lucioni's paintings shows the old foundry and the river as it looks today. Luigi Lucioni is making quite a name for himself all right. He started painting here in Barre, I

think. His pictures are very good, especially in detail; his detail is perfect. He's careful and exact, a good craftsman. A machinist like me can appreciate Lucioni's work, it's so clear cut and clean lined. Some say it's too much like photography, but I like it. There's nothing sloppy and smeared about it, and none of this crazy modernistic stuff. Lucioni is clear and honest as a blue-print.

“I've been working here about twelve years now. I'm sixty. I've always been a machinist. I learned the trade after I left high school. My folks wanted me to go to college but I wanted to go into the machine-shop instead. I liked machinery, and I wanted to do things with my hands. I couldn't sit around in an office all day... I didn't graduate from high school. I was in my last year when I had a fight with the principal. He slapped my face and I knocked him down. That was up in Newport where I was born. I could have gone back to school if I'd apologized — got up and apologized in front of the whole school. But I wouldn't do it. It wasn't my fault in the first place. He had no reason to slap my face, and I couldn't take that from anybody. So I never went back to school. I went into the shop and learned the machinist trade, and I 3 learned it from the ground up. You had to in those days. Now they don't have any apprenticeship system, and pretty quick there won't be any more skilled machinists left. Some of the big machine-shops know this and are starting schools to train young men in the trade. Of course improved machines take the place of lots of men now, and they keep on improving them all the time.

“I remember there was one job they wanted us to turn out in six hours. Well, at first it took forty hours. After a while we worked it down to seven or eight hours; and that was fast. They made “jigs” for it, jigged it up so now it can be done in forty-five minutes! Jigs are what we call special manufacturing tools or equipment that speed up the process. From forty hours to forty-five minutes sometimes! You can usually figure that improved machines cut about 76 per-cent off the time. The hell of it is we have to make the jigs ourselves, the jigs that take money right out of our pockets and throw men out of work. Men making the machines that will put them out of work, sooner or later. That's irony for you.

“I was in the army during the Spanish-American War. We spent most of our time in Chickamauga Park, and it was nothing but a goddamn fever swamp. They lost more men there than they did in Cuba, a hell of a lot more. They died like flies at Chickamauga. Just because it was a battle site and a park they made it into a military camp and it killed off their own troops by the thousand. All the fighting we did was in rough-and-tumble street brawls with the southerners, still fighting the Civil War. We had some tough battles with them all along 4 the line. They still hated Yankees, especially Yanks in uniform. My father had been in the Civil War. He was wounded at Cold Harbor, and that probably saved his life. The rest of his outfit was wiped ont, killed there or taken prisoners and died in prison camps.

“During the World War I worked in Boston in a [munitions?] plant, making guns and parts of guns, big guns and machine guns. That was the best money I ever earned, but I've always done pretty good. I sent two boys through college, and my girl through nurses' training. I guess I'm still earning more money than any of them. But someday, if times ever get better, they'll go way ahead of me, of course. They should go higher. But the way things are now it's pretty tough going for them. I have to file an income tax report, my salary ran just over twenty-five hundred last year. And that's not bad for a sixty-year old machinist.

“My wife and I are alone now and we live in an apartment. It's nice and comfortable, plenty of room for us, and room enough for the kids when they come home to see us. I just turned my car in for a new Plymouth. It's the first brand-new car I've had since I was in the garage business, back around 1912... I lost money in the automobile game that time. My partner left me holding the bag. I should have stayed right in the machine-shop, I'd have been a lot better off.

“We live a pretty quiet life here. We don't go in for social stuff much. We have a few good friends and they drop in once in awhile. My wife and I both read a lot, we've always been great readers, and we go to the movies maybe once a week. 5 In the summer what we

enjoy most is driving around the country, seeing new places, exploring back country roads. Vermont's a beautiful place in the summertime. We used to go to all the ball games when our boys played for the high school teams, but we've lost interest since they got through playing.

“My job isn't a hard one, physically, but it's very fine close work. Everything has to be dead-accurate to the smallest fraction of an inch, and the least bit of a mistake spoils the whole piece. When I first came here I ran a planer; now I'm on the boring mill. I got a good start learning the trade, and I can handle about any kind of machine you'll find in a machine-shop. Of conrse I'm on my feet all the time, and that makes me pretty tired. Never used to bother me, but I'm sixty years old now...”

[Harmon?] was a man of medium height with wide sloping shoulders and a compact strength. His scarred and broken hands had once been graceful in their power. His face, lined and shrunken a little, was still strongly-carved, gravely intelligent. The eyes were mild and brown, and his smile was charming, almost boyish. He spoke in a pleasant well-modulated voice, and good blood was evident in his quiet dignity. It was not surprising when Harmon remarked simply that his family was an old English one, and his sisters had made quite a study of geneology and the Harmon line. It was rather odd that such a man should have chosen the machinist trade, but Harmon said? “I like machines and I like to work with my hands.”

“Between stonecutters and machinists,” he said, “there's a certain understanding and respect. It's natural enough, I 6 think, between two groups of trained skilled workman like that. Each side may feel that its work is the better and more important, but still each side can admire the work of the other. Some of my best friends have been stonecutters. A lot of them are dead now. It makes me feel pretty bad sometimes. We used to drink and talk together. Now some of them have been dead ten or fifteen years, or more.

“Our shop depends on the granite business, and our work fluctuates with theirs. But as long as the shop is open I get in full time. The foreman kind of depends on me, you see. He says I'm the best machinist he's got. If I am it's just because I got a better training in the beginning. I learned the trade from some real old-time machinists, and they made sure I got everything.

“The war in Europe has made the machine business boom in this country. The shops in Springfield are running day and night, mostly to fill orders in Europe. I worked for J and L in Springfield myself, and sometimes I wish I'd stayed there. It's a good outfit to be with. But I was on the night-shift there and I couldn't get used to it. We made more money than the day-shift, but I couldn't seem to got rested. I lost a lot of weight and was feeling pretty low, so I gave it up. I Know a lot of men working down there, and they tell me they can't fill the orders they're getting from England, and other countries over there. They just shipped thirteen machines to England at $28,000 per — machines to make fourteen-inch aerial bombs; I think they said. France had a $147,000 order to be delivered in September, 1941, and paid the 25 percent deposit. 7 They won't be needing that order now. That's big business down there in Springfield. The biggest thing in this state without question. That one big plant probably did a five or six million dollar business last year, and after the Federal tax was paid they made a net profit of about 25 percent. Now with America finally ready to get prepared there'll be plenty of business right here for the machine-tool industry.

“A fellow down there told me a funny one. It seems that the head janitor in the shop is a deputy sheriff, and he makes about fifteen dollars when he picks up a vagrant and puts him in the county jail at Woodstock. He'd sent this one bum there, and when the bum got out he looked the sheriff up right away. He wanted to go back to jail. The sheriff went to a grand juror in Springfield and told him he might as well make out the papers and get the fee. But the juror said: 'I can't do it. I've gone my limit already.' So the sheriff told the bum to go to Ludlow and he'd drive over and pick him up there. He even got the vag a ride to Ludlow! The sheriff drove over and the bum was waiting. Took him up to court in

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Woodstock, and the hobo landed back in jail. When his pals saw him come back in they said, 'You lucky bastard!' The sheriff collected his fifteen bucks and went home.

“Well, I hope I can work five years more, and I guess I can. Then I'll be sixty-five, and if this old-age pension amounts to anything I'll be eligible for that. I don't see any reason why that pension shouldn't become a permanent thing, and a damn good thing for the country. A man can't go on working forever, and sixty-five is old enough. And not very many 8 men can put aside enough to retire on. Not the way things are at the present time.

“I've worked hard all my life. I want to hold out for five years more. I can't hope for much longer than that; I don't want to. I get pretty tired sometimes now... But I do want to keep going five years more, and if nothing happens I will.”